

# THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 105 NO. 4 FALL 2021



## ALTAMONT TURBINES: STILL A THREAT

BY BLAKE EDGAR

**A**t 40 years, the Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area is one of the nation's oldest wind farms—and remains one of the deadliest to birds. Golden Gate Audubon Society and environmental allies thought they'd reduced that threat by as much as 80 percent in 2010, through a repowering agreement with Altamont's largest wind operator that involved replacing older turbines with modern ones that were taller, fewer, and more widely spaced.

CONTINUED on page 3

Golden Eagle.  
George Eade





Loggerhead Shrike is among the birds found at Tesla Park.

## GOOD NEWS AMIDST OUR MANY CRISES

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**A**fter a summer filled with bad news, I'm grateful to report some positive developments. Tesla Park—a 3,100-acre open space area in Livermore's hills—is now finally protected, thanks to years of work by a coalition of more than thirty groups including Golden Gate Audubon Society, Ohlone Audubon, and the California Native Plant Society.

Save Tesla Park was a passion project for Celeste Garamendi, Nancy Rodrigue, and many others on the Save Tesla Park Steering Committee, with leader-

ship in Sacramento from Senator Steven Glazer and Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, and support from Assemblymember Phil Ting and Senator Nancy Skinner. Governor Newsom agreed in early September to transfer the land from the state's off-road vehicle program to state parks, while returning funds to the off-road vehicle program for a suitable location elsewhere. Tesla Park is home to unique geological, biological, and cultural features that include three nesting pairs of Golden Eagles and important habitat for at least six

other threatened species.

Global good news is harder to come by. The sixth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report was released over the summer, stressing that we must act quickly to avoid the most catastrophic impacts. Wind and solar energy are critical components of any pathway to zero emissions. As recounted in this month's cover story on Altamont Pass, we in the Bay Area know the dangers of badly sited wind energy. Yet we also understand that wind is a necessary piece of the puzzle: Wind power can be generated at night and on cloudy days when solar may not meet consumer needs. So we must remain vigilant and work with wind-power developers to ensure that siting of future wind projects doesn't create further problems for wildlife.

An alternative, more wildlife-friendly approach to renewable energy involves distributed generation. A 2016 study found that California has enough sun, rooftops, and parking lots to provide for most of our energy needs without building a single new commercial-scale wind or solar farm. As the state moves towards its goal of 100 percent renewable energy by 2045, we should push for greater use of distributed solar panels that don't destroy habitat or threaten birds and other wildlife.

One final piece of good, albeit local, news... Golden Gate Audubon successfully restarted our field trip program this summer after a 16-month Covid-19 hiatus. Nearly 600 people participated in 35 trips around the region without any health problems at all. Thank you to all who participated, and we look forward to opening more spaces in our programs this fall.

### NEWS BRIEFS

#### Help Enforce Rodenticide Ban

California has a new law banning most use of second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs), which can kill hawks, owls, coyotes, and other predators that eat rats with poison in their systems. Help enforce this law by reading labels of bait traps in your neighborhood: [goldengateaudubon.org/blog-posts/help-enforce-californias-rodenticide-ban](https://goldengateaudubon.org/blog-posts/help-enforce-californias-rodenticide-ban).

#### Victory at Tesla Park

Conservation groups including local Audubon chapters won a victory in September when Governor Newsom signed legislation banning off-road vehicles from sensitive habitat known as Tesla Park in eastern Alameda County. The 3,100 acres—which support at-risk species such as Golden Eagles and California red-legged frogs—will now become a California state park.

#### Bird-friendly Coffee Club

Protect habitat for wintering songbirds in Central America while enjoying superb organic, shade-grown coffee through our Bird-friendly Coffee Club. Birds & Beans coffee is certified by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. Order once a month and pick up your coffee at a location in Berkeley, Oakland, or San Francisco. See [goldengateaudubon.org/login/bird-friendly-coffee-club](https://goldengateaudubon.org/login/bird-friendly-coffee-club).



ALTAMONT TURBINES from page 1

Yet those hopes have not been realized.

“We were wrong when we relied on the theory that well-sited repowered turbines would significantly reduce bird mortality,” said Mike Lynes, who worked on the Altamont settlement for GGAS and is now Director of Public Policy for Audubon California.

Studies released in 2017, 2018, and 2020 indicate that repowering hasn’t benefitted many of the bird species most affected by Altamont turbines. The repowered turbines also seem to be having greater impacts on bats.

“We’ve learned there is no place in Altamont that is safe for birds: It varies from extreme risk to very bad risk,” said GGAS Executive Director Glenn Phillips.

The Altamont wind area covers 56 square miles of northeastern Alameda and Contra Costa counties. It supports one of North America’s densest populations of Golden Eagles, as well as other raptors and bats—all of which face lethal injuries from the spinning blades.

In the wake of the 2010 repowering settlement, Alameda County authorized a Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) covering its portion of the Altamont, with the intent to minimize repowering’s toll on wildlife. Four focal raptor species (Golden Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Western Burrowing Owl, and American Kestrel) were selected as standards by which biolo-



Elizabeth Winstead

Golden Eagle near an Altamont turbine.

*“We’ve learned there is no place in Altamont that is safe for birds: It varies from extreme risk to very bad risk.”*

gists would assess the degree of bird deaths related to wind power. The PEIR established mortality thresholds and mitigation measures for repowering projects.

Subsequent studies have determined that Altamont is an ecological sink for Golden Eagles, who are drawn there by prime foraging opportunities in the grasslands. Biologist Shawn Smallwood estimates that—despite repowering and winter turbine shutdowns—the number of eagles declined by 45 percent between 2008 and 2019.

Golden Gate Audubon continues to monitor new wind proposals for PEIR compliance and for ways to minimize mortality. In 2020, GGAS and Audubon California appealed Alameda County’s approval of a project adding 40 turbines generating almost 110 megawatts, which would have been Altamont’s largest individual wind farm. Negotiations among various stakeholders persuaded the developer, sPower, to reduce it to 16 turbines and 50 megawatts.

Now GGAS, Audubon California, and three other local Audubon chapters are raising the alarm about another proposed development, Brookfield Renewable’s Mulqueeney Ranch Wind Repowering Project.

Alameda County approved Brookfield’s plan for up to 36 new turbines generating 80 megawatts—more than the 50 megawatts previously generated by older turbines on that same site.

“These repowered turbines may well have greater impacts on raptors and bats in the Altamont than the former project,” Lynes said.

Golden Gate Audubon and allies are appealing the decision before the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, which is expected to hear the appeal in October.

For Phillips, who watched Altamont’s wind turbines from his childhood bedroom window, the time has come to restrict further wind development there. Without question, wind power is needed as a tool against climate change, he said. But wind farms should be limited to places that do less damage to wildlife.

“If this were a new area that hadn’t been developed for wind before, it would never happen,” Phillips said. “This is the textbook case study for badly sited wind energy.”

*Do you live in Alameda County? Contact your county supervisor and urge them not to approve the Mulqueeney Ranch project as proposed.*



Harjeet Singh

Golden Eagle.

# OYSTERS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND PIER 94

BY NOREEN WEEDEN

**P**ier 94, our habitat restoration site along San Francisco's southeastern shoreline, is a potential oyster hotbed!

No, we're not talking about turning Pier 94 into the next Hog Island Oyster Company. These are a different kind of oyster—tiny, native oysters that make better eating for wildlife than for humans, and that could become part of our defense against climate change.

The smallest oyster in the U.S., Olympia oysters (*Ostrea lurida*) are the only species native to the West Coast. They provide food for birds such as sea ducks and Black Oystercatchers, as well as rock crabs, bat rays, and sea otters. They also improve water quality by filtering over 5 gallons of water per hour while consuming microscopic plants known as phytoplankton.

Today oyster beds can be part of a climate adaptation strategy called “living shorelines”—using natural materials like plants and sand rather than concrete sea walls to prevent erosion and counter increased storm surges.

Olympia oyster populations plummeted in San Francisco Bay over the last century due to overharvesting, pollution, and habitat loss. But a recent pilot effort shows we may be able to foster an oyster colony at Pier 94, the salt marsh restoration site that Golden Gate Audubon Society manages for the Port of San Francisco along the city's southeastern waterfront.

Over the past two years, scientists from the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (SERC) installed ceramic tiles in a subtidal section of the Pier 94 shoreline. Aided by Golden Gate Audubon volunteers, they tracked the number and size of oysters that attached themselves to the tiles, a process called “recruitment” that young oysters need to grow into adulthood.

SERC's final report, delivered in 2021, found Pier 94 an “excellent site for oyster restoration.”

Oysters attached themselves to the tiles at a high rate. They were found at a variety of sizes, indicating a healthy balance of younger



Monitoring oysters and tiles at Pier 94.

Noreen Weeden

and older surviving oysters.

SERC attributed this success to factors including cooler air temperatures than other parts of the Bay and the absence of a predatory mollusk called an oyster drill.

“(We) recommend Pier 94 as a site where oyster restoration efforts that deploy additional hard substrate for oysters to settle on is likely to be successful,” the researchers concluded.

The next step will be to seek grant funding for oyster restoration at Pier 94 on a larger scale. A flourishing oyster population there can help promote oyster repopulation throughout the Bay.

So Pier 94 won't ever be a trendy Hog Island-style oyster bar. But with financial support and the continuing commitment of Audubon volunteers, it could be something even better—a shellfish buffet for Bay wildlife and a test case for climate adaptation.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Berkeley Bird Festival

Sunday, October 17 — all day  
U.C. Berkeley & various locations  
Join us for the first-ever Berkeley Bird Festival! Bird walks throughout the city, bird chalk art on the U.C. campus, and family-focused crafts plus avian art performances at the David Brower Center in downtown Berkeley. For details, see [berkeleybirdfestival.org](http://berkeleybirdfestival.org).

### 2021 Christmas Bird Counts

Oakland: Sunday, Dec. 19  
San Francisco: Tuesday, Dec. 28  
Richmond: Sunday, Jan. 2, 2022  
Spend a fun day in the field contributing to community science, or count birds in your backyard for our Feeder Watch. Beginning and experienced birders are warmly welcome. Registration opens late October: [goldengateaudubon.org/cbc](http://goldengateaudubon.org/cbc).

### Be a Lake Merritt Docent

Share views and information about Lake Merritt's birds with people strolling around the lake! You don't need to be an expert birder, just enthusiastic about our wintering ducks and other birds. We offer a mid-October training for the winter docent season. For details, please email Maureen at [mlahiff@aol.com](mailto:mlahiff@aol.com).

### Nature Journaling Class

We still have spaces in our Nature Journaling at Lake Merritt class, taught by artist and nature educator Clay Anderson. Class includes one Zoom session plus one field trip to Lake Merritt each month through June 2022. For details and sign-up, see [goldengateaudubon.org/education/classes](http://goldengateaudubon.org/education/classes).





Shawn Smallwood

Burrowing Owls.

## BRINGING BACK THE BURROWING OWL

DOUG BELL AND SHAWN SMALLWOOD

ONLINE

Thursday, October 21  
7 p.m. program  
Zoom

The East Bay used to support many colonies of Burrowing Owls, from the shorelines along eastern San Francisco Bay to the Diablo Range. Those have now been reduced to overwintering sites along the shore and tenuous colony sites inland, including within the boundaries of the Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area (APWRA). However, the APWRA has been a major mortality source for Burrowing Owls and other winged wildlife such as bats and Golden Eagles. Doug Bell and Shawn Smallwood will present results of long-term research on Burrowing Owl colonies within the APWRA and management efforts conducted on East Bay Regional Park District lands in the region, including volunteer-based habitat restoration programs.

Shawn Smallwood earned his Ph.D. in Ecology at U.C. Davis and has studied wildlife impact from wind turbines for 20 years. His research includes animal density and distribution and habitat selection. Doug Bell serves as Wildlife Program Manager for the East Bay Regional Park District and as a Research Associate in ornithology and mammalogy at the California Academy of Sciences. He has engaged in long-term studies of Golden Eagles, Prairie Falcons, and other raptors with an emphasis on assessing and lessening impacts from renewable energy development.



Roger van Gelder

Acorn Woodpecker.

## CLIMATE AND BIRDS IN CALIFORNIA

MIKE LYNES

ONLINE

Thursday, November 18  
7 p.m. program  
Zoom

North America's bird populations have declined by approximately 3 billion birds since 1970 and two-thirds of North America's bird species now face an even greater risk of extinction due to climate change. Species at risk include not only ones that are already endangered, but common backyard birds like Chestnut-backed Chickadees, as detailed in Audubon's landmark 2018 study, *Survival By Degrees*.

But Audubon isn't taking this threat sitting down. During this presentation, Mike Lynes of Audubon California will discuss the threats to birds from climate change and how the statewide group is working with chapters, allies, and decision-makers to implement climate-smart policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, responsibly develop renewable energy, and build more resilient communities of birds and people. Mike will explain how nature-based climate solutions and policies like California's "30 by 30" initiative will expand parks, open spaces, wetlands, and coastal areas to meet climate goals and benefit both people and birds.

Mike Lynes is Director of Public Policy for Audubon California. He formerly served as Executive Director of Golden Gate Audubon Society after working as field ornithologist and conservation biologist with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory (now Point Blue Conservation Science).

For Zoom links, see [goldengateaudubon.org/education/speaker-series](https://goldengateaudubon.org/education/speaker-series).

# NEW CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT COMING TO RICHMOND

BY ILANA DEBARE

**G**olden Gate Audubon Society is known for two longstanding Christmas Bird Counts—our San Francisco count, which started with the organization’s founding in 1917, and our Oakland count, which started in 1938.

Now GGAS is taking the historic step of adding a third Christmas-season count in Richmond, a community whose abundant bird life has been overlooked for too long.

“Western Contra Costa County has three designated Important Bird Areas—Brooks Island, the North Richmond shoreline, and other Eastshore wetlands such as Miller-Knox Regional Shoreline—yet it’s never had an official CBC,” said GGAS Executive Director Glenn Phillips.

CBCs are carried out by local Audubon volunteers but overseen by the National Audubon Society, which imposes certain technical requirements: Each count must cover a 15-mile-diameter circle, and it can’t overlap with any other count circles.

No one ever made an explicit decision to exclude Richmond from the CBC. But in the wake of World War 2, redlining and racial discrimination turned Richmond into a majority-Black, low-income city. Meanwhile, Audubon chapters were largely white and typically focused on communities where the bulk of their membership lived.

In recent years, Golden Gate Audubon has expanded activities in Richmond. GGAS’s Eco-Education program provides hands-on nature education in several Title 1 (low-income) elementary schools there, and our popular Osprey nest cam recently completed a fifth season along the Richmond shoreline.

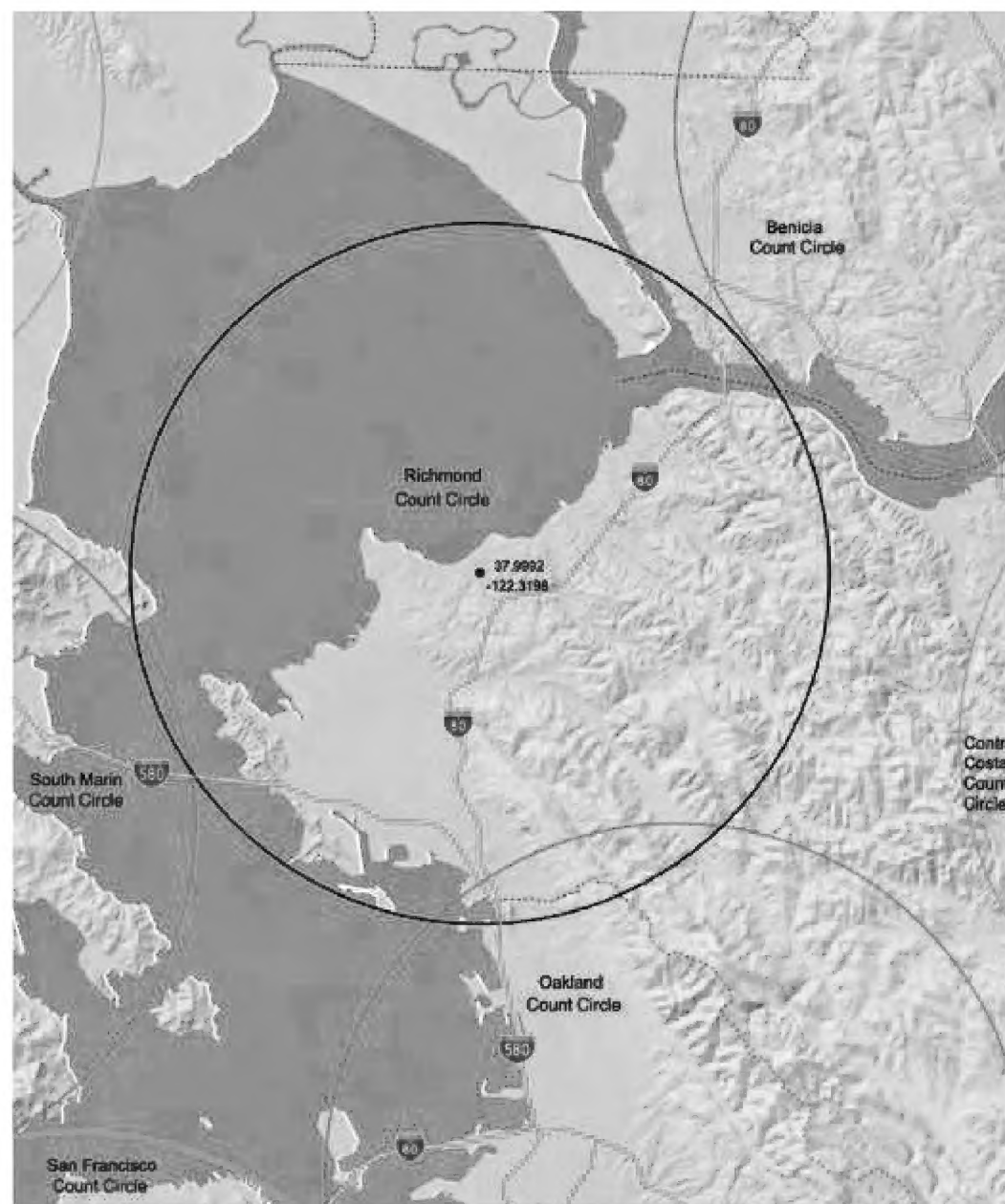
Some GGAS members including Bob Lewis and Rusty Scalf looked into starting a Richmond count about ten years ago. But when they tried to draw a 15-mile circle, they couldn’t do it without overlapping small parts of existing counts such as Oakland and Benicia.

This summer, Lewis and GGAS Board President Eric Schroeder decided to revive the idea. Glenn Phillips heartily agreed and approached National Audubon to green-light a Richmond count. But National refused, citing the issue of overlapping territory.

“We decided to just do it anyway,” Lewis said. “We don’t need National. We can call it a GGAS count or unofficial count, with the idea that someday National will view all our data and see the light.”

A Richmond count offers exciting possibilities: GGAS members living in Richmond will finally have a count of their own. Count organizers can reach out and engage Richmond residents—including youth—who are new to birding. The count will generate data on bird populations that can be used to advocate for wildlife in debates like the current fight over the future of Point Molate.

The first-ever Richmond CBC is scheduled for Sunday, January 2, 2022. Want to take part? Check the GGAS website in early November, or contact Richmond CBC Compilers Derek Heins and Karyn Noel at [RichmondCBC@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:RichmondCBC@goldengateaudubon.org).



Map of new Richmond count circle and nearby count circles.



Black Oystercatchers are found along the Richmond shoreline.



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We are deeply appreciative of every individual, business, and organization who supports Golden Gate Audubon. In this issue, we recognize major donors and recurring monthly donors from the past year, September 1, 2020 through August 31, 2021. Donors of all types and amounts will be recognized in our Annual Report.

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Golden Gate Audubon Society engages people to experience the wonder of birds and to translate that wonder into actions which protect native bird populations and their habitats.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY

The Golden Gate Audubon Society was founded January 25, 1917. Golden Gate Audubon Supporting Membership is \$35 per year. You can join or renew on the website or through our Berkeley office.

The Gull is published four times per year. Special third-class postage paid in Oakland, CA. Send address changes to the office promptly. The post office does not forward The Gull.

Learn about upcoming Golden Gate Audubon events every month! Send your name and email address to ggas@goldengateaudubon.org to receive our monthly e-newsletters.

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This issue of The Gull was published October 2021.

2021 OSPREY NEST CAM SEASON

Comparing the fifth season of our live Osprey nest cam to fine wine, we'd say it was a really good year. Rosie, the female of the pair, returned sooner than expected from her winter migration south. Eggs were laid by the end of March, a week earlier than usual. By early May, three chicks were successfully hatched.

At the time of banding, it was thought the chicks were all male. Surprise! DNA results revealed two females and one male. With three healthy young fledglings to feed, Rosie and her mate Richmond brought a record 761 fish to the nest.

The juveniles left the nest area along the Richmond shoreline between July 28 and August 24, at ages ranging from 86 to 115 days. Like Rosie, they've likely headed south for the winter. But you can still catch avian action at sfbayospreys.org, with occasional visits to the nest by Richmond (who over-winters in the Bay Area) or other birds. And if you see a blue-banded Osprey while vacationing in Central America or Mexico, let us know!

—Robin Banks, Osprey volunteer



Literal "empty nester" parents Rosie and Richmond in early September.

www.goldengateaudubon.org

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**4 Native Oysters at Pier 94**

Pier 94 turns out to be perfect for native oysters, which support wildlife and buffer the shoreline from sea level rise.

**5 Speaker Series**

Burrowing Owls in the East Bay, and what Audubon California’s doing to protect the birds of our state from climate change.

**6 New CBC for Richmond**

Richmond’s abundant bird life and vibrant human community deserve a Christmas Bird Count—and now they’re getting one.

**BACKYARD BIRDER**



California Towhee.

This species has a limited range on the west coast—from southern Oregon to the tip of Baja. Within this range, it’s found in a variety of habitats and has adapted well to urban and suburban areas: The Oakland Christmas Bird Count has reported more Cal Towhees each year since 2008 than any other CBC in the country.

In birding lingo the species is characterized as “highly sedentary,” meaning it’s non-migratory and has a small home territory. If you’ve got a pair in your backyard, you’re likely to find that they’re settled there. But the more general meaning of “sedentary” doesn’t apply to this species. These birds aren’t fast movers nor do they move far, but they are constantly in motion, usually shuffling along the ground, foraging for seeds and other vegetable matter, often making their characteristic loud “chip” calls. According to research done nearly a century ago by A. L. Dawson, these metallic-sounding notes serve a range of purposes, including keep-in-touch signaling, warning notes, and even challenges.

During spring, towhee pairs defend their territories aggressively. The male’s chip calls evolve into song by adding a trill at the end. The female builds the nest, which may be in a tree, shrub, or even on the ground. She also incubates the eggs, which hatch in about two weeks. But when it comes to child rearing, the males take a turn; the chicks need a high protein diet, so the foraging now focuses on insects such as grasshoppers, caterpillars, spiders, beetles, wasps, and ants. Chicks fledge at eight to eleven days and stay with their parents for up to six weeks, by which time they’ve achieved their full adult size. And since California Towhees mate for life, if you do have a resident pair, you’re likely to see them for years to come.

**THE TOGETHERNESS OF TOWHEES**

BY ERIC JAMES SCHROEDER

**B**irds of the World, the bible of avian lore, seems almost dismissive of towhees as “little more than large New World sparrows.” And California Towhees are a uniform plain gray/brown with just a touch of cinnamon color on their throats and their vents (their bottoms). Males are slightly larger than females; otherwise they’re indistinguishable. Uniformly plain they may be, but Cal Towhees are a beloved local bird.